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## PSYCHOLOGY LOOKS AT MORALS AND POLITICS<sup>1</sup>

HAROLD D. LASSWELL

**I**N COMMON with any branch of social and political science psychology bears an instrumental relationship to morals and politics. Our moral values are acquired from the interplay of original nature with the culture into which we are born; our values are derived from that part of culture that includes the basic postulates of metaphysics and theology; our values are implemented by the part of culture called science and practice (including psychology and politics).

If there is any universal human experience it is this one: Moral intentions are often frustrated by weaknesses of which the individual is aware, yet feels incapable of removing. The relationship of psychological knowledge to many such cases of moral frustration is benign, for by the timely application of this knowledge the moral intention may be properly implemented. Soldiers who want to fight for their country are often prevented from doing so by sudden seizures of panic, by sudden attacks of blindness, by partial paralysis of arms and legs. These are the shell-shock cases that appear in any war, especially in wars where nonprofessional soldiers are recruited to the armed forces and exposed to danger. The sufferers may be individuals who sincerely desire to fulfil their patriotic duty; yet they are prevented by crippling weakness. Patient psychological observation has disclosed many of the causes that contribute to these traumatic seizures and has devised methods of relief. Often the sufferer has struggled to keep out of his mind both the fear of death and the feeling of self-contempt for experiencing fear. By his struggle against these disrupting and embarrassing thoughts

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and feelings, the soldier intensified his level of anxiety to an unbearable degree, and found partial relief in self-crippling reactions—the symptoms of shell shock—panic, blindness, paralysis. His personality was divided against itself. Such personalities can be assisted by appropriate psychological methods to achieve integration, hence to free themselves from the dominance of impulses that frustrate moral purpose.

The spectacle of frustrated moral intention is familiar in the ordinary experiences of civilian life. One is reminded in this connection of the history of a successful young lawyer who became inspired with the determination to rid his city of graft and corruption. He put his dynamic energy and professional skill at the service of a citizens' organization that began to make a genuine impression on local politics. But there was a serious flaw in the program; the intentions of the young lawyer were continually running into difficulties because of his alcoholic excesses. From time to time he was seized by an insatiable thirst and went on a debauch that lasted several days. He was no silent, morose, retiring drinker who gloomily contemplated suicide in splendid isolation as his conscience slowly dissolved in alcohol; he belonged, rather, to the irritable variety whose sensitiveness to insult becomes progressively more acute as his perceptions of reality grow dim. He frequently held doormen, waiters, and even casual pedestrians responsible for alleged indignities heaped upon him. Hence the crusader for civic virtue occasionally figured in a public brawl, casting himself and his cause into disrepute. Fortunately something is known about a few of the many varieties of excessive alcoholism. This civic leader belonged to one of the more benign and better understood varieties, the proper psychological measures relieved him of his illness, thus removing an almost fatal barrier to his good intentions.

Less spectacular are the problems of those administrators who struggle against a conspicuous defect in their handling of others. One administrator, otherwise impeccable, was contin-

ually subject to angry outbursts against colleagues and subordinates. He struggled manfully against his "failing," this internal check on the achievement of his intention to set a praiseworthy pattern of administrative conduct. For a while he tried to gain self-control by will power. He tried all the standard remedies of folklore—he "counted to ten," but even when he counted to ten times ten, he still took the hide off his subordinates when the arithmetic was over. Often such rudimentary expedients work; but the personality structure of this man contained so many incompatible tendencies that he had need of less ritualistic and more insightful methods.

All these men frustrated their best intentions. Psychological study showed that they defeated themselves by turning destructive impulses against themselves. More than that, the root of their destructiveness was found in some lack of respect for themselves. The "terrible tempered Mr. Bang," the administrator with the irascible temper, was a man who was struggling against certain tendencies to treat himself with contempt. It was found that his eruptions were connected with situations in which he was thrown with persons of more commanding physique than his own. By patient self-observation, he obtained insight into the degree to which his adjustments to life had been determined by his feelings of helplessness, and of compensating rage, at his diminutive body build. Such negative valuations of the self were not part of his conscious waking life. On the contrary, he automatically deflected his attention from his slightness of stature and failed to see the full intensity of his self-contempt, and to free himself from its destructive results.

There is no doubt that the young lawyer and civic crusader who disgraced himself and his cause was acting destructively. Here, again, the significant source of his destructive impulses was severe anxiety about the status of the self. His drunken orgies came just after crises in which he was excessively tense, excessively intent upon the persuasion of others. The moment the ordeal was over, he relapsed into a state of weak self in-

dulgence. Through it all he was screening from himself the contempt that he felt for himself as one who was so excessively dependent upon the favorable emotional responses of other people. His concern about being unmanly was one of the most embarrassing threats to his self-respect.

The disciplined study of human personality has confirmed the ancient saying that the enemy of man is man, is man's own destructiveness. And more: the causes of destructive impulses have been painstakingly explored, and the upshot is to emphasize anew the pathogenic importance of insufficient self-respect. We can recognize these basic relations the most readily in the lives of children. We are familiar with the child who bullies weaker playmates, and we know how often this is connected with deep concern about the status of the self and represents an overcompensation against ridicule for a weak and flabby appearance. We know, too, the timid and "beaten" child, wholly withdrawn into itself, hopeless of affection. Destructive impulses spring in no slight degree from deficient self-respect; these impulses may be discharged, in part, against other persons, as with the bully, or against the self, as with the "beaten" child.

These basic relations, so easy to grasp with reference to children, we often fail to extend to the whole of life, where they apply with equal truth. Part of the difficulty here is the complex interrelationship of destructive impulses and destructive practices. Even though we are in control of our own destructive tendencies, we may act destructively upon others. Despite our good intentions, even when we have been emancipated from self-crippling reactions, we may still have destructive effects upon other people. A great barrier to moral achievement, in addition to insufficient self-knowledge, is insufficient knowledge of the institutional routines of society and their effect upon others.

A typical problem of this kind confronts the administrator who sincerely desires to contribute to the welfare of others, yet finds it difficult to obtain the needed facts about the lives of

other people and the way they are affected by official acts. The head of a huge department of government may earnestly seek to contribute to the realization of a democratic society. He may understand that such a society is a commonwealth of mutual deference, a community in which there is opportunity for the maturing of talent into socially useful skill. Assume that this administrator is put in charge of many local communities, such as those of a resettlement administration. How is he to find out the facts about the impact of his administrative decisions upon the quality of living in these villages?

Moral intentions, we repeat, call for more than self-knowledge. They must be implemented by reliable knowledge of the attitudes of other people through time and of the factors that affect them. This is a realm to which modern psychological observation has made steady contribution. It is no longer necessary for the administrator to rely exclusively upon the hasty impressions of a busy field trip, or upon occasional petitions and protests. Competent participating observers can record their experience with fidelity and make it available to decision-makers. Sometimes the results show that democratic processes lack vitality because the local manager of the community has failed to maintain genuine consultation. It is obvious that democracy requires that people shall participate in the decisions that most concern them; but many community managers grow slack, and the frequency of democratic consultation dwindles toward zero. The observer can assemble the facts that are needed to portray the fluctuating volume of democratic processes of consultation. Fewer and fewer citizens may take part in community meetings. More and more citizens, when interviewed under conditions that encourage candor, may express scepticism about "what good it does" to take a hand in collective activities. The complaint may be that the local manager has no real influence and that the central administration at Washington does what it pleases. Washington seems far away and capricious in its decisions. A checkup over a period of sev-

eral months may reveal that the central administrators have taken many decisions without clarifying—much less consulting—the local community. Busy administrators, despite all of their sincerity, often fail to clarify—and one way to defer to the personality of another is to make clear to him what is going on. A checkup may also show that the government appears most often in a deprivational role—as a tax collector, a rent collector, an evictor, and the like. Seldom if ever does the government express appreciation for a job well done. And expressions of appreciation are among the most rudimentary, yet important, ways of contributing to the self-respect of deserving people.

In a democratic society, then, we are concerned about the flow of appreciation, of clarification, of consultation—for these are the specifics of deference. When men and women are deferred to, they are appreciated, clarified, consulted. Whatever practices interfere with the flow of mutual respect, and arouse destructive impulses, endanger the fulfilment of a democratic order.

Manifestly the enemy of a democratic society is human destructiveness in all its forms—destructive impulses, destructive practices. If our moral intention is to realize a democratic society, we need a science of democracy to implement the goal. Such a science will draw heavily upon the findings and the observational methods of psychology, especially since psychological methods are the means especially appropriate to the discovery of the human consequences of living under any social order. Some of the methods of psychology are appropriate to the cultivation of self-knowledge by candid self-observation, in this way reducing the frustration of moral intentions by incompatible tendencies within the personality itself. And by the proper correlation of psychological methods with other scientific procedures we may gain the knowledge needed to identify and to control destructive practices no less than destructive impulses.

Institutional practices are destructive when they arouse great concentrations of destructive impulse. It is evident that pro-

found crises of destructiveness are fostered by irregularity in the tempo of social change and by lack of balance in social structure. Whatever contributes to such irregularities and unbalance is dangerously destructive.

Irregularity of social change places too great a burden upon the capacity of men to adjust to their environment. Those who increase abruptly in influence are prone to act destructively—to behave with arrogant lack of consideration toward their fellows. Those who are made suddenly weak are also provoked to destructiveness—and take out their hostilities against themselves or others.

Our modern world has conspicuously suffered from the destructive crises nourished by irregularities that we can attribute to lack of control over the machine. Thanks to the rapid introduction of machine methods of production, the carriers of Western European civilization imposed their will upon peoples throughout the world—upsetting established patterns of life, precipitating colossal problems of immediate adaptation. The humiliations to which non-European peoples were subjected led to those vindictive movements of revenge against European hegemony that we witness today.

The abrupt change in the comparative strength of European states intensified the difficulties of harmonious adjustment among the bearers of European civilization itself. Rival arrogances—made more lethal by the gadgets of a machine society—doomed the citizens of every modern power to increasing insecurity of life and limb.

In addition to the crises among European and non-European peoples, and to the clashes of European peoples with one another, our world has witnessed the crises generated in the process of modifying the internal structure of every modern society. The rapid emergence of the specialist on market manipulation—on bargaining, the businessman—put in positions of influence in society men who were not specialists upon the harmonious adjustment of men in society.



The insecurities that were generated by irregular social development were intensified by the imbalances that were accentuated in the structure of a given society. By social structure we mean the basic practices that prevail at a given time and place in the distribution of values among the members of a community. The influence of any group is measured by its control over values—by its share in the deference, income, and safety of the community. When values are highly concentrated in a few hands, the rule of balance is broken, and lack of balance in social structure contributes to insecurity. The destructive impulses of the predominant few are expressed in arrogant disregard of others; while the destructive impulses of the subordinated many are provoked into internalized or externalized forms of expression. An enemy of democracy is unbalanced social structure; and whatever practices undermine social balance are in need of exposure and revision.

What does it mean to achieve the rule of balance in society? A balanced social order achieves a commonwealth of mutual deference. To be deferred to is to be taken into consideration—to be consulted, appreciated, and clarified. In a democratic commonwealth there is a relatively general share in power, respect, and insight. To share in power is to be consulted on important decisions; decisions are the choices that are backed by the most deprivational sanctions at the disposal of society (usually violence). The function of government in any community is to make the most influential decisions. (The most influential communities in world-affairs are states.) The *function* of government is not, of course, to be confused with the *institution* of government; the institution of government is what happens to be called government in a given time and place. We know that the function of government may be but partly exercised by what is locally known as the institution of government. Indeed, as in the case of monopoly business corporations, the institution that exercises one of the important functions of government may be called “business.”

To democratize power, then, is to maintain the practice of general participation in the making of influential decisions. Closely associated with the democratization of power is the democratization of respect; respect is another part of deference. To be respected is to be appreciated, and society is stratified into respect classes as well as into power classes or income classes. We can speak of power classes in the community, dividing the population into policy-makers, managers, and rank and file. (In a democracy, of course, the recruitment of policy-makers is on the basis of skill and popular responsibility.) When we speak of respect classes, we divide people according to degrees of reciprocal intimacy, according to inter-marriage, mutual participation in clubs and social life. (Where the respect—or “social”—classes are immobile from one generation to another, we speak of them as “castes.”)

Our own civilization has been conspicuously deficient in the practice of mutual respect. No more flagrant example could be found than the attitude taken up in nominally democratic societies toward those who were thrown out of work in the late collapse. It is true that not many of those who were squeezed out of the processes of production starved to death. Most of them were given enough to keep breath in their bodies. But we were not sensitive to the fact that men who are thrown out of employment are also thrown out of respect. We added insult to injury by stigmatizing these millions as “unemployed,” by treating them as a burden on their fellow-men, a dead weight on the taxpayer, a mass of humanity for whom there was no longer a respected place in society. We kept them from dying, it is true, but we gave them no reason to live. We forgot that men want not only a job; they want security and opportunity on a respected job.

Some of the dictators have been more canny than some of the leaders of states aspiring toward democracy. Instead of a shovel and a job in a make-work program—open to vaudeville jokes and neighborhood insult—some of these dictators have

given millions of young people a shovel and a job and a gun in the building of a new social order. It is impossible to exaggerate the loathing with which any friend of democracy looks upon many of the measures of totalitarian depotism, but it is unwise to forget that the partial success achieved by these despotisms is that they have appealed to the craving for respect that is a powerful characteristic of human personality.

To democratize the distribution of deference is to share power, respect, and insight. There is insight when there is a sense of common purpose—and an understanding of common methods—throughout the community. There is insight when men and women are equipped with the skill of observation that enables them to discover and to regulate their own destructive impulses. There is insight when there is a division of labor that specializes human energy upon the disciplined scrutiny of the established practices of society for the purpose of discovering those whose consequences are destructive.

The psychological sciences put squarely in the forefront of attention the human consequences of all the laws and customs of a given society. By appropriate methods of observation it is possible to discern the degree to which any set of established practices operates destructively upon human nature by stimulating destructive impulses. At the root of destructive impulses lies deficient self-respect. Sufficient self-respect is largely dependent upon a continual inflow of respect from the personal environment—an inflow that enables the child to develop without the warping that arises from an unstable emotional environment and the adult (mature or senescent) to count upon security and opportunity in a respected place in society.

That we face colossal crises of self-destruction in our historical period is a tragic fact from which no man can escape. And yet there are positive features in the life of our time. There is a blind mass groping for security in a respected place in society, a blind groping for deference that lends itself momen-

tarily to the exploitation of despotic demagogues, but that can gain clarity and vitality if given insight and direction.

It is the province of psychological science to contribute to the development of an applied as well as a general science of politics, an applied science that bears much the same relation to the general science of politics that medical science bears to general physiology. The general science of politics is concerned with the factors affecting the magnitude and the distribution of values—of influence, with specific reference to the distribution of deference. The science of democracy is concerned with the factors affecting the achievement and the perpetuation of a democratic distribution of influence—with special reference to the distribution of deference—of power, respect, and insight.

From the past we are equipped with many sagacious insights into the causes and preventives of human destructiveness. In the literary remains of eminent teachers of classical Egypt, classical China, classical Greece, and classical Rome we find brilliant definitions and characterizations of human nature in society. The distinctive contribution of our generation, as of many future generations, will not be in the field of general definition—for the basic definitions of morality have been given long ago. The task that is urgent in the life of mankind is to take these terms of ambiguous reference—these inspiring, penetrating, impressionistic remarks—and give them an operational meaning in the world of our time. To this end we cultivate the needed skills of patient observation, of careful record-making, of cautious analysis. We deplore only that those who gave us brilliant definitions in the past did not enrich our social inheritance by data of observation. They did not supply us with precise criteria of the promising civil servant, conciliatory judge, benevolent leader; they did not leave a disciplined record of their own experience in observing the acts of men. And our social inheritance is rich in suggestive remarks and poor in recorded data. Centuries of human experience have been irretrievably lost because our predecessors did not apply

themselves to the task of making reliable records of what they saw. We must make up that gap in the legacy that we leave to future generations.

For our task is not to add new general definitions of moral ideas. It is not even to improve upon the sentences that have been used in the past in deriving moral definitions from the key propositions of theology and metaphysics. In this sense our aim in the cultivation of science is modest. Yet in another sense our aim is enormously high; it is nothing less than to give hands and feet to morality, to discern with ever increasing accuracy the causes and controls of human destructiveness. Moral values are *acquired* from the experience of human nature in contact with culture; they are *derived* from a specialized branch of culture, metaphysics and theology; they are *implemented* by other specialized branches of culture, psychological, social, and political science, and psychological, social, and political practice.

WASHINGTON, D.C.